

## THE COVID -19 SHADOW PANDEMIC: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK-PRIVATE SECTOR

Ashwini Roy A. S

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Government First Grade College, Basavanagudi, Bengaluru,  
Karnataka, India

### ABSTRACT

*The Unprecedented increase in domestic violence since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic marks an urgent call for action for the private sector to leverage their existing resources and influence to keep women safe at home and safe at work. Employers have a 'duty of care to their employees working remotely from home and in a good position to support those who may be affected by domestic violence. Many employers recognize their role and have been doing their part before and during COVID-19, and the importance of creating a safe and supportive working environment for survivors of domestic violence. An important element of this, reflected in the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) framework, is the border promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment in the world of work.*

*Across the world, one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence during their lifetime. In Europe, as many as 43 percent of women have experienced psychological abuse, and 22 percent of women have experienced physical or sexual abuse, from an intimate partner. Domestic Violence and abuse are often invisible but may be experienced in the lives of your employees. If you wait for something to happen, you have waited too long. Being proactive and taking a role in preventive can make all the difference. This paper tries to analyze the Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Violence and the workplace.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Domestic Violence

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### INTRODUCTION

Domestic Violence is about power and control; it deprives survivors of their agency and confidence, often making it difficult to report it. Being confined and isolated during the lockdown, along with added stresses, tension and financial insecurity may exacerbate existing abuse and control or it may occur for the first time. Working Remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic has made reporting and seeking help even harder, particularly if a survivor is unable to leave the house to go to work or carry out other routine tasks. Simply making a call privately may be impossible. There are added risks of not being able to leave the home and having the protection of the workplace, where a survivor may have been able to talk to colleagues or a manager and access information, services and support confidentially during working hours.

Given what we know about the heightened risk of domestic violence and the increasing reported numbers of survivors seeking help during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that substantial numbers of women who are working remotely are experiencing domestic violence. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic adds greater health and safety risks

for an employee working from home during a lockdown. These are relevant issues for the immediate future as lockdowns are lifted and in the longer-term where remote working is likely to be a more common feature of the future world of work. Keeping women's safety in their employment, including when working remotely with the possibility of financial independence, is critical to enabling women to survive domestic violence. A starting point for many companies has been to draw up workplace policies with support and safety measures.

### **How Are Companies Responding during the COVID-19 Crisis**

Some companies have been proactive in reacting to the heightened risk of domestic violence, aware that during confinement tensions may increase and abusers will have a greater chance of exercising control and causing physical, sexual, or psychological harm. Challenges arise because communications with employees can only take place via online meetings or via the telephone.

Some companies give support to help managers to recognize the problem and make it possible or colleagues to speak about problems they may be facing at home, including how they can respond in effective and non-judgmental ways, and how they can address risks, find safe ways to communicate and give support to a colleague. Additional support is provided through up-to-date information about domestic violence or other specialist services that are designated as 'essential services', giving survivors access to information, safety planning and support, counseling, legal support or long-term safe housing.

Women's Empowerment Principle (WEPs) signatory Vodafone phone has adapted its Global Policy and Toolkit on domestic violence and abuse to the new reality for employees working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key priority is to ensure that employees can work safely from home. Based on the recognize, respond, and refer model the Global Policy and updated guidance provide a comprehensive range of workplace supports, including 10days paid safe to leave and security measures that are adapted to remote working from home. This is supported by two podcasts for managers which aim to raise awareness about the heightened risks of domestic violence during confinement and beyond. Vodafone Foundation has also developed the Bright Sky app and other help-line resources to give support and information to survivors of domestic violence and abuse in many of its markets across the world.

Unilever, another active WEPs signatory, has built a comprehensive global framework to preventing and responding to intimate partner violence and sexual harassment taking place on and off its tea estates in Africa and South Asia. Developed in collaboration with UN Women and in consultation with the government, producers from different commodity sectors, and women's rights groups, the interventions focus on the safety, health, and wellbeing of women workers, children living on the estate, and smallholder farmers. In North America, the mining company Rio Tinto has issued safety guidelines for employees working at home during the lockdown. Based on its existing family and Domestic Violence Guidance, it encourages employees to speak to a manager, HR representative, or colleague. Support is available through a dedicated email that is monitored by the health and safety team and which can trigger two levels of support via safe words that enable a manager to 'check-in with me or 'to be referred to professional help'. An employee who needs the safety of the workplace as a respite from abuse or to discuss workplace supports with a manager can be designated as an 'essential office worker' and attend a safe office location (if applicable) operated by following COVID-19 safety protocols, and/or offered emergency accommodation in accordance with Rio Tinto's Policy. Some companies have created networks and campaigns using social media and other tech supports to raise awareness about domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent much-needed resources.

One way to do this has been to initiate awareness-raising campaigns about domestic violence and how to access specialist services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Long-time signatory of the WEPS, Kering, operating in France, Italy, UK and USA, has an awareness campaign entitled #You are not alone. This gives information and tailored online resources for women survivors of domestic violence and signposts them to specialist organizations that can provide support during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has also responded to the expressed needs of its partners by distributing emergency funds to organizations that support victims of domestic violence. Collaboration and networking between companies can bring critical resources and expertise to bear, adding leverage, avoiding duplication, and ensuring that resources reach to support organizations. A further example of business collaboration is Business Fights Poverty, a European-based network of multinational companies, which has developed a range of business actions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of these is an Action Toolkit to address the challenges of domestic violence and online bullying and harassment. It gives practical suggestions for companies and encourages them to harness their core business strategies including marketing, innovation and philanthropy to respond to the increased levels of domestic violence. These networks and campaigns can be of crucial importance in raising awareness amongst companies, particularly those that are at an early stage in developing policies and responses to ensure the safety of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Recommendations for Companies**

Principle 3 of the Women's Empowerment principles addresses the health, safety, and well-being of all employees, and highlights the responsibility of employers to support victims of violence and to provide a workplace that is free from violence and harassment. Early intervention is essential to enable a survivor to stay in her job and to live independently. This includes carrying out prevention, risk assessments, and safety planning in the workplace; offering information and workplace support to survivors of domestic violence; ensuring that managers recognize the signs of violence against women and provide workplace supports such as paid leave and security measures; creating a workplace culture where survivors can disclose domestic violence and stay safely in their jobs, and engaging in wider corporate awareness-raising, funding and influence to ensure services meet the needs of survivors of domestic violence.

### **Immediate Measures: Leadership**

- Ensure that company strategies for remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic include effective responses to the risks of heightened levels of domestic violence.
- Send regular clear messages from the CEO and other leaders about the company's commitment to supporting employees affected by domestic violence, confidently and without recrimination.
- Engage in social dialogue with workers and trade unions, and seek expert help from domestic violence specialists, to ensure appropriate workplace responses in supporting survivors.
- Involve women and support women's leadership and decision-making.
- Provide practical guidance, resources and training through online webinars and discussion, to equip managers with the skills and capacity to recognize and respond with support for an employee affected by domestic violence. Ensure that this is prioritized in all communications with managers and ensure that managers are supported and guided in these roles.

- Encourage everyone to take a stand against domestic violence, including employees at all levels, their family, and friends to act as active bystanders who report their concerns if someone are in danger.

### **Immediate Measures: Leverage Company Resources and Influence**

- Engage in public awareness campaigns about the risks of domestic violence during the pandemic and how a survivor can contact a helpline or emergency help.
- Increase availability and access to tech support through online platforms for information and safety planning.
- Fund specialist domestic violence support services for women and children, including legal support, safety planning, counseling, and as a last resort safe housing. These support services could be provided as part of business-to-business partnerships.
- Establish emergency measures to ensure the safety and security of women and their children in their own homes, recognizing that removal of a perpetrator may be the least disruptive way to guarantee women's safety and continued employment.
- Support national, regional and local authorities to designate domestic violence services as essential services so that domestic violence survivors can access services and safe housing, during a lockdown, including essential sexual and reproductive health services.

### **Medium to Long-Term Measures**

Create a Future where women are safe at home and safe at Workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to rethink how the private sector can work together with other stakeholders to end domestic violence. With the ending of lockdown as women return to work, there will likely be a further increase in requests for workplace support to help survivors of domestic violence. Therefore, companies need to be prepared for scaling up their efforts in the medium and longer-term. The Private sector can be at the forefront of innovation, dialogue, and collaboration with governments, workers, organizations, service providers and non-governmental organizations. In the longer term, the private sector is well-placed to provide a transformative role to:

- Develop an inclusive, comprehensive corporate strategy to shift company culture so that a workplace is a place of trust, support and protection, for example, by fostering a culture of Zero tolerance of all forms of violence and harassment. Promote it through a whole-of-organization approach to gender equality and women's leadership.
- Commit at the highest levels to provide safety and support for survivors of domestic violence, whether it takes place inside or outside of the workplace.
- Implement a policy that addresses domestic violence impacts on the workplace, built on a foundation of trust. This could be a stand-alone policy on domestic violence or it could be integrated into a policy on all forms of violence and harassment in the world of work, including sexual harassment.

- Hold perpetrators who are employees accountable, with sanctions, including the possibility of dismissal, if domestic violence is perpetrated during work time when workplace resources such as a working telephone or computer are used during or outside work time, or where safety is compromised in the workplace. Ensure that prevention is built into accountability measures, e.g., through referral to perpetrator treatment and counseling programs.
- Implement effective collaboration and coordination to shift perceptions about domestic violence and engage in transformative approaches to gender equality at work, ending a culture of victim-blaming, silence and shame around domestic violence.
- Shift policy priorities, such as that woman and their children can stay safely in their homes and continue to work safely while being supported by survivor-centered services.
- Engage men in the workplace at all levels and in trade unions to be champions in preventing domestic violence.
- Promote social dialogue in the design, implementation, and review of policies, including through the negotiation of collective bargaining agreements, as provided for in ILO convention 1990 and Recommendation 206.
- Learn from what workers ensure that the best possible company measures are introduced, implemented and regularly evaluated.
- Collect anonymized gender-disaggregated data on domestic violence (of Survivors and perpetrators) and the workplace impacts.

## CONCLUSIONS

The spread of the novel Coronavirus has created a myriad of problems for the people to grapple with. In the absence of a vaccine and effective treatment for this virus, the governments are forced to impose quarantines to reduce the spread of the disease. However, this has resulted in a paradox of social distancing, which includes issues such as economic instability, mental health problems, and isolation. Although there have been researches exploring the impact of COVID-19, there is a lack of rigorous literature highlighting these issues from the perspective of gender. This also involves the issue of rising gender violence during the pandemic. COVID-19 has not only led to an increase in the cases of gender-based violence but has disconnected them from their support networks. To reduce the prevalence of the issue, it is crucial to acknowledge the extent of gender-based violence, reimagine government policies, and support networks to make it easier for the victims to access them and, lastly, create awareness about the issue as well as the resources available to tackle it.

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